

Fifth Sunday in Lent – 2025

Isaiah 43:16-21

Philippians 3:4b-14

Luke 20:9-20

I assume that when the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, when they wrote their accounts of the life of Jesus that they were amazed at what they wrote. I assume that they were amazed not because their writing was so crisp or that their literary prowess was so superlative or that their narrative was so captivating, so gripping and laden with emotion. All that is true and they likely knew it. I suspect that what amazed them was Jesus' teaching itself – how it anticipated events before they happened and how it clarified events after they happened. Being a Christian is *knowing* that Jesus is the Son of God, that He is God's love, God's holiness is human form. Being a Christian is *knowing* that Jesus lived a perfect life in obedience to the law, that He naturally and thoroughly fulfilled all of God's commands, that He willingly offered Himself as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of man, that He paid the price in full, rose again, lives and reigns to eternity. Being a Christian is wonderful. We KNOW that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. We KNOW that He has prepared a place for us in heaven, that death has no sting and that He is present among us, serving us with the bounty of His death and resurrection.

Being a Christian means that we pay attention to His Word! Not as a bookish exercise to win academic brownie points but because He Himself is embedded in His Word, that His Word strengthens us in this life – that we grow, we are enriched, we realize our potential as human beings through this Word. Plain and simple; you don't know who you are apart from this Word. Plain and simple; you will fumble around in this life if you distance yourself from this Word. My job, my calling is to preach to you and I love doing it. Your job is to internalize this Word, embrace it, lay hold of it and ruminate upon it. This is an amazing Word. Dynamic, vibrant, living and active – this Word lays hold of you and takes you to places you can't get to without it. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John must have been amazed. Perhaps they felt the Holy Spirit directing them; perhaps they didn't. But Christ's teaching must have floored them because of how prophetic it is, how it opens doors to the deepest of truths.

Jesus told His antagonists what they were going to do before they did it. Jesus told His antagonists that what they were about to do was going to go very badly for them. Jesus put His life and His coming crucifixion within the context of salvation history, in a story form, in parable form, so that His opponents could easily understand the convergence of titanic forces that were at work. And when they heard the parable, they were inflamed. Jesus told them the truth; Jesus showed them the future and they hated both. And they crucified Him for it. Which is the point of the parable. The evangelists must have been amazed as they wrote about it. I'm amazed.

The parable is not complex. A man plants a vineyard. God is the man and Israel, His chosen people, is the vineyard. The man rents his vineyard to tenants. God gives oversight of His people to the religious leaders – the chief priests, those who oversee the worship life of Israel. The man who owns the vineyard is pretty interested in fruit. It's My vineyard. I enjoy fruit. The vineyard is going to produce fruit. I expect the tenants to tend My vineyard in the way that I prescribe and return to Me a portion of the harvest. The tenants in the parable get cranky with the owner. The tenants in the parable lose sight of the structure of this relationship. When they

see the owner's representatives, they tar and feather them, ride them out of town on a rail. No fruit; no respect for the owner, and a rather brutal treatment of the owner's servants. The owner seems remarkably patient... to a point. Perhaps you think that it's strange, but the owner decides to send a more valuable servant, who is no servant at all but rather His Son. Obviously, the owner thinks, they will respect My Son. These tenants can't possibly be as felonious as to abuse My Son. Ah, but that's *exactly* what they do. They conjure up a demented idea that they can obtain the vineyard for themselves if they kill the Son.

It's bonkers but that's what they do. Everyone knows what these murderers deserve. Everyone knows that the owner of the vineyard will marshal all of His resources and come and beat the living daylight out of those corrupt, vile, worthless tenants and give the vineyard to others who will gladly return fruit to the owner. Jesus told this story *before* He was crucified. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John wrote about Christ's teaching, including this and stories like it in their Gospel accounts of Jesus' life. How much more proof does the world need that this is the Son of God and that His revelation captures exactly the true spiritual score for all of us? The Lord's antagonists were inflamed. They knew what the story meant. They also knew that it was true. They knew that their unbelief would bring God's wrath upon them and they acted upon it anyway. Amazing! Is this the God that you want to lie to? Is this the God that you want to dismiss in favor of your favorite self-indulgence? Is this the God that you want to put on the back bench in favor of the world's conjecture about what is sin and what is not? I think that that attitude is very unwise.

You've been ransomed from fear and hatred and selfishness and greed. You belong to God. He's saved you from death and hell. Fruit; Christ's fruit is in your soul. You eat the fruit that dangled from the tree of life, the tree of the cross – Jesus' body and blood. You are Christ's disciple. You can't behave any old way that you please.

Luke tells us plainly: "The scribes and chief priests sought to lay hands on him at that very hour, for they perceived that he had told this parable against them, but they feared the people" (Luke 20:19). They feared the people. That's what restrained their awful plan, for a time. Who *should* they have feared? Whom do you fear? Israel had rejected the prophets which God has sent to them. Over and over, the unrepentance, the wayward abuse of the worship life which God had given to Israel, they turned their hearts away from the God who saved them from Egypt, who saved them from slavery and sin and death. Grace was abandoned. God's intention to save the unworthy was turned into a works righteous religion by the Pharisees and others. Ultimately, they rejected the Son. Ultimately, Jerusalem was sacked. Christ saw it all coming and He told them. And upon hearing it they were bent on killing Him. Amazing.

We are the benefactors of that history. We are the benefactors of this Word. We are the benefactors of Christ's cross and empty tomb. Jesus said: "For God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17). You have been saved. Christ came into the world to save you. He looks for fruit. God looks for the fruit of His Son on you. Love, mercy, humility, fidelity, sacrifice, service, temperance, patience, goodness, chastity – Christ is the vine and the vine produces fruit. God is looking for it on the branch that is Wiley James Sidney Smith IV. His love is in me and His love is in you. All of us have been brought out of darkness and into His marvelous light. God has

given us the vineyard. Gentiles, the Christian church, the domain of Christ's kingdom – as a gift of extraordinary value, we have the vineyard. We tend the health of the vineyard by being in His Word, by receiving His gifts, by intentionally returning to Him the fruit that He desires. The vineyard of Christ the King Lutheran Church is not ours by right. We must prove ourselves faithful. Now is the time. The critical time is now. Produce fruit in keeping with repentance – in every aspect of your life. Show grace to others. Let your faith shine. Let it be known that you stand firmly in this world as a Christian. Defend the weak. Serve the forgotten. Use your gifts to glorify God.

Jesus is the stone that the builders rejected. Nails were the ultimate rejection. But those nails are our salvation. God is always in control. He can't be removed from His throne. The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. His rejection is the means by which He is enthroned. It is marvelous. It is true. God's glory is manifested in His suffering; for us; for our forgiveness. Christ crucified is the world's cornerstone. We are so fortunate to be in His vineyard. We fall in brokenness, we fall in repentance on the stone and He raises us up as new creations. Unbelievers will receive the blow of judgment. "... when it falls on anyone it will crush him" (Luke 20:18). We who believe in Him will never be put to shame. May God work in us, through us, that the fruit of Christ's life would be laden on the branches of our lives.